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Selected Writings, 1927-1939

Visions

of Excess

Selected Writings,

1927-1939

Georges Bataille

Edited and with an Introduction by Allan Stoekl

Translated by Allan Stoekl,
with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr.

Theory and History of Literature, Volume 14

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A. S.



Figure 1. Bataille (left) with his father and brother, ca. 1898. (Photo courtesy of Société Nouvelle des Editions Pauvert.)

[Dream]

In the street in front of the house we lived in in Reims. I leave on a bicycle. Paved street and streetcar rails. very annoying on a bicycle. paved street one doesn't know whether to go left or right. multiplication of streetcar rails. I brush against a streetcar but there is no accident. I would like to reach the place where after a turn there is a smooth road but from now on it is no doubt too late and the wonderful smooth road on which you go up and then down with the speed you gain [is] now paved. In fact when I turn the road is no longer as it was before they redid it but in order to redo it they have transformed it into an immense trench in which pronounced _____ stand out. I see these strong supports but more and more I see them in precarious forms first they are formed by the frames of barrels with disjointed planks in circles that will have to be filled with earth then more and more disjointed barrels to erect. One proceeds as it follows extremely virile and brutal cellar workers and even [horrible blacks] arrive to set up the long and thin tottering barrel. Suddenly an atrocious darkness descends; I go around in the form of an American gentleman. To erect the barrel it is necessary to pull on thick cords black with soot on which animals such as enormous atrocious rats are hung by the tail but which threaten to bite, but they must be killed. The cellar workers are with great pleasure in contact with this scum which they joyfully hang up but the American visitor in his suit risks being stained and bitten and he is not a little disgusted and frightened. however he stands his ground with difficulty the slimy and bloody fish or dead but menacing rats at the level of his face.

The association was thus established.

Horrible rats and all the terrors of childhood. The cellar one goes down into with a candle.

Terror of spiders.

And then suddenly I remember having gone down into the cellar with my father, a candle in my hand. Dream of the bear with a candlestick.

Terrors of childhood spiders etc. linked to the memory of having my pants pulled down on my father's knees.

Kind of ambivalence between the most horrible and the most magnificent.

I see him spread his obscene hands over me with a bitter and blind smile. This memory seems to be the most terrible of all. One day returning from vacation I find him again showing me the same affection.

Waking up I associate the horror of rats with the memory of my father correcting me with a blow in the form of a bloody toad into which a vulture (my father) sinks his beak. My buttocks are bare and my stomach is bloody. Very blinding memory like the sun seen through the lids of closed eyes, in red. My father himself, I imagine that, since he is blind, he also sees the sun in blinding red. Parallel to this memory my father sitting.

This has the effect of reminding me that my father being young would have wanted to do something atrocious to me with pleasure.

I'm something like three years old my legs naked on my father's knees and my penis bloody like the sun.

This for playing with a hoop.

My father slaps me and I see the sun.

The Solar Anus

It is clear that the world is purely parodic, in other words, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form.

Ever since sentences started to *circulate* in brains devoted to reflection, an effort at total identification has been made, because with the aid of a *copula* each sentence ties one thing to another; all things would be visibly connected if one could discover at a single glance and in its totality the tracings of an Ariadne's thread leading thought into its own labyrinth.

But the *copula* of terms is no less irritating than the *copulation* of bodies. And when I scream I AM THE SUN an integral erection results, because the verb *to be* is the vehicle of amorous frenzy.

Everyone is aware that life is parodic and that it lacks an interpretation.

Thus lead is the parody of gold.

Air is the parody of water.

The brain is the parody of the equator.

Coitus is the parody of crime.

Gold, water, the equator, or crime can each be put forward as the principle of things.

And if the origin of things is not like the ground of the planet that seems to be the base, but like the circular movement that the planet describes around a mobile center, then a car, a clock, or a sewing machine could equally be accepted as the generative principle.

The two primary motions are rotation and sexual movement, whose combination is expressed by the locomotive's wheels and pistons.

These two motions are reciprocally transformed, the one into the other.

Thus one notes that the earth, by turning, makes animals and men have coitus, and (because the result is as much the cause as that which provokes it) that animals and men make the earth turn by having coitus.

It is the mechanical combination or transformation of these movements that the alchemists sought as the philosopher's stone.

It is through the use of this magically valued combination that one can determine the present position of men in the midst of the elements.

An abandoned shoe, a rotten tooth, a snub nose, the cook spitting in the soup of his masters are to love what a battle flag is to nationality.

An umbrella, a sexagenarian, a seminarian, the smell of rotten eggs, the hollow eyes of judges are the roots that nourish love.

A dog devouring the stomach of a goose, a drunken vomiting woman, a sobbing accountant, a jar of mustard represent the confusion that serves as the vehicle of love.

A man who finds himself among others is irritated because he does not know why he is not one of the others.

In bed next to a girl he loves, he forgets that he does not know why he is himself instead of the body he touches.

Without knowing it, he suffers from the mental darkness that keeps him from screaming that he himself is the girl who forgets his presence while shuddering in his arms.

Love, or infantile rage, or a provincial dowager's vanity, or clerical pornography, or the diamond of a soprano bewilder individuals forgotten in dusty apartments.

They can very well try to find each other; they will never find anything but parodic images, and they will fall asleep as empty as mirrors.

The absent and inert girl hanging dreamless from my arms is no more foreign to me than the door or window through which I can look or pass.

I rediscover indifference (allowing her to leave me) when I fall asleep, through an inability to love what happens.

It is impossible for her to know whom she will rediscover when I hold her, because she obstinately attains a complete forgetting.

The planetary systems that turn in space like rapid disks, and whose centers also move, describing an infinitely larger circle, only move away continuously from their own position in order to return to it, completing their rotation.

Movement is the figure of love, incapable of stopping at a particular being, and rapidly passing from one to another.

But the forgetting that determines it in this way is only a subterfuge of memory.

A man gets up as brusquely as a specter on a coffin and falls in the same way.

He gets up a few hours later and then he falls again, and the same thing happens every day; this great coitus with the celestial atmosphere is regulated by the terrestrial rotation around the sun.

Thus even though terrestrial life moves to the rhythm of this rotation, the image of this movement is not the turning earth, but the male shaft penetrating the female and almost entirely emerging, in order to reenter.

Love and life appear to be separate only because everything on earth is broken apart by vibrations of various amplitudes and durations.

However, there are no vibrations that are not conjugated with a continuous circular movement; in the same way, a locomotive rolling on the surface of the earth is the image of a continuous metamorphosis.

Beings only die to be born, in the manner of phalluses that leave bodies in order to enter them.

Plants rise in the direction of the sun and then collapse in the direction of the ground.

Trees bristle the ground with a vast quantity of flowered shafts raised up to the sun.

The trees that forcefully soar end up burned by lightning, chopped down, or uprooted. Returned to the ground, they come back up in another form.

But their polymorphous coitus is a function of uniform terrestrial rotation.

The simplest image of organic life united with rotation is the tide.

From the movement of the sea, uniform coitus of the earth with the moon, comes the polymorphous and organic coitus of the earth with the sun.

But the first form of solar love is a cloud raised up over the liquid element.

The erotic cloud sometimes becomes a storm and falls back to earth in the form of rain, while lightning staves in the layers of the atmosphere.

The rain is soon raised up again in the form of an immobile plant.

Animal life comes entirely from the movement of the seas and, inside bodies, life continues to come from salt water.

The sea, then, has played the role of the female organ that liquifies under the excitation of the penis.

The sea continuously jerks off.

Solid elements, contained and brewed in water animated by erotic movement, shoot out in the form of flying fish.

The erection and the sun scandalize, in the same way as the cadaver and the darkness of cellars.

Vegetation is uniformly directed towards the sun; human beings, on the other hand, even though phalloid like trees, in opposition to the other animals, necessarily avert their eyes.

Human eyes tolerate neither sun, coitus, cadavers, nor obscurity, but with different reactions.

When my face is flushed with blood, it becomes red and obscene.

It betrays at the same time, through morbid reflexes, a bloody erection and a demanding thirst for indecency and criminal debauchery.

For that reason I am not afraid to affirm that my face is a scandal and that my passions are expressed only by the JESUVE.

The terrestrial globe is covered with volcanoes, which serve as its anus.

Although this globe eats nothing, it often violently ejects the contents of its entrails.

Those contents shoot out with a racket and fall back, streaming down the sides of the Jesuve, spreading death and terror everywhere.

In fact, the erotic movements of the ground are not fertile like those of the water, but they are far more rapid.

The earth sometimes jerks off in a frenzy, and everything collapses on its surface.

The Jesuve is thus the image of an erotic movement that burglarizes the ideas contained in the mind, giving them the force of a scandalous eruption.

This eruptive force accumulates in those who are necessarily situated below.

Communist workers appear to the bourgeois to be as ugly and dirty as hairy sexual organs, or lower parts; sooner or later there will be a scandalous eruption in the course of which the asexual noble heads of the bourgeois will be chopped off.

Disasters, revolutions, and volcanoes do not make love with the stars.

The erotic revolutionary and volcanic deflagrations antagonize the heavens.

As in the case of violent love, they take place beyond the constraints of fecundity.

In opposition to celestial fertility there are terrestrial disasters, the image of

terrestrial love without condition, erection without escape and without rule, scandal, and terror.

Love, then, screams in my own throat; I am the *Jesuve*, the filthy parody of the torrid and blinding sun.

I want to have my throat slashed while violating the girl to whom I will have been able to say: you are the night.

The Sun exclusively loves the Night and directs its luminous violence, its ignoble shaft, toward the earth, but it finds itself incapable of reaching the gaze or the night, even though the nocturnal terrestrial expanses head continuously toward the indecency of the solar ray.

The *solar annulus* is the intact anus of her body at eighteen years to which nothing sufficiently blinding can be compared except the sun, even though the *anus* is the *night*.

The Language of Flowers

It is vain to consider, in the appearance of things, only the intelligible signs that allow the various elements to be distinguished from each other. What strikes human eyes determines not only the knowledge of the relations between various objects, but also a given decisive and inexplicable state of mind. Thus the sight of a flower reveals, it is true, the presence of this well-defined part of a plant, but it is impossible to stop at this superficial observation; in fact, the sight of this flower provokes in the mind much more significant reactions, because the flower expresses an obscure vegetal resolution. What the configuration and color of the corolla reveal, what the dirty traces of pollen or the freshness of the pistil betray doubtless cannot be adequately expressed by language; it is, however, useless to ignore (as is generally done) this inexpressible *real presence* and to reject as puerile absurdities certain attempts at symbolic interpretation.

That most of the juxtapositions of the *language of flowers* would have a fortuitous and superficial character could be foreseen even before consulting the traditional list. If the dandelion conveys *expansion*, the narcissus *egoism*, and the wormwood flower *bitterness*, one can all too easily see why. At stake here is clearly not the divination of the secret meaning of flowers, and one can easily make out the well-known property or the adequate legend. One would look in vain, moreover, for parallels that strikingly convey a hidden understanding of the things here in question. It matters little, in fact, that the columbine is the emblem of sadness, the snapdragon the emblem of desire, the waterlily the emblem of indifference . . . It seems opportune to recognize that such approx-

imations can be renewed at will, and it suffices to assign a primordial importance to much simpler interpretations, such as those that link the rose or the spurge to love. Not that, doubtless, these two flowers alone can designate human love—even if there is a more exact correspondence (as when one has the spurge say: “It is you who have awakened my love,” so troubling when conveyed by such a shady flower), it is to flowers in general, and not to any specific flower, that one is tempted to attribute the strange privilege of revealing the presence of love.

But this interpretation seems unsurprising: in fact love can be posited from the outset as the natural function of the flower. Thus the symbolic quality would be due, even here, to a distinct property and not to an appearance that mysteriously strikes the human sensibility. Therefore it would only have a purely subjective value. Men have linked the brilliance of flowers to their amorous emotions because, on either side, it is a question of phenomena that precede fertilization. The role given to symbols in psychoanalytic interpretations, moreover, would corroborate an explanation of this type. In fact it is almost always an accidental parallel that accounts for the origin of substitutions in dreams. Among other things, the value given to pointed or hollowed-out objects is fairly well known.

In this way one quickly dismisses the opinion that external forms, whether seductive or horrible, reveal certain crucial resolutions in all phenomena, which human resolutions would only amplify. Thus there would be good reason to renounce immediately the possibility of replacing the *word* with the *appearance* as an element of philosophical analysis. It would be easy to show that only the *word* allows one to consider the characteristics of things that determine a relative situation, in other words the properties that permit an external action. Nevertheless, the *appearance* would introduce the decisive values of things . . .

It appears at first that the symbolic meaning of flowers is not necessarily derived from their function. It is evident, in fact, that if one expresses love with the aid of a flower, it is the corolla, rather than the useful organs, that becomes the sign of desire.

But here a specious objection could be raised against interpretation through the objective value of *appearance*. In fact the substitution of juxtaposed elements for essential elements is consistent with all that we spontaneously know about the emotions that motivate us, since the object of human love is never an organ, but the person who has the organ. Thus the attribution of the corolla to love can easily be explained: if the sign of love is displaced from the pistil and stamens to the surrounding petals, it is because the human mind is accustomed to making such a displacement with regard to people. But even though there is an undeniable parallelism in the two substitutions, it would be necessary to attribute to some puerile Providence a singular desire to satisfy people’s manias: how in fact

can one explain how these garish elements, automatically substituted for the essential organs of the flower, develop in such a brilliant way?

It would obviously be simpler to recognize the aphrodisiac properties of flowers, such as odor and appearance, which have aroused men's and women's amorous feelings over the centuries. Something is explosively propagated in nature, in the springtime, in the same way that bursts of laughter are propagated, step by step, each one provoking and intensifying the next. Many things can be altered in human societies, but nothing will prevail against the natural truth that a beautiful woman or a red rose signifies love.

An equally inexplicable and equally immutable reaction gives the girl and the rose a very different value: that of ideal beauty. There are, in fact, a multitude of beautiful flowers, since the beauty of flowers is even less rare than the beauty of girls, and characteristic of this organ of the plant. It is surely impossible to use an abstract formula to account for the elements that can give the flower this quality. It is interesting to observe, however, that if one says that flowers are beautiful, it is because they seem to *conform to what must be*, in other words they represent, as flowers, the human *ideal*.

At least at first glance, and in general: in fact, most flowers are badly developed and are barely distinguishable from foliage; some of them are even unpleasant, if not hideous. Moreover, even the most beautiful flowers are spoiled in their centers by hairy sexual organs. Thus the interior of a rose does not at all correspond to its exterior beauty; if one tears off all of the corolla's petals, all that remains is a rather sordid tuft. Other flowers, it is true, present very well-developed and undeniably elegant stamens, but appealing again to common sense, it becomes clear on close examination that this elegance is rather satanic: thus certain kinds of fat orchids, plants so shady that one is tempted to attribute to them the most troubling human perversions. But even more than by the filth of its organs, the flower is betrayed by the fragility of its corolla: thus, far from answering the demands of human ideas, it is the sign of their failure. In fact, after a very short period of glory the marvelous corolla rots indecently in the sun, thus becoming, for the plant, a garish withering. Risen from the stench of the manure pile—even though it seemed for a moment to have escaped it in a flight of angelic and lyrical purity—the flower seems to relapse abruptly into its original squalor: the most ideal is rapidly reduced to a wisp of aerial manure. For flowers do not age honestly like leaves, which lose nothing of their beauty, even after they have died; flowers wither like old and overly made-up dowagers, and they die ridiculously on stems that seemed to carry them to the clouds.

It is impossible to exaggerate the tragicomic oppositions indicated in the course of this death-drama, endlessly played out between earth and sky, and it is evident that one can only paraphrase this laughable duel by introducing, not

as a sentence, but more precisely as an ink stain, this nauseating banality: *love smells like death*. It seems, in fact, that desire has nothing to do with ideal beauty, or, more precisely, that it only arises in order to stain and wither the beauty that for many sad and well-ordered personalities is only a limit, a *categorical imperative*. The most admirable flower for that reason would not be represented, following the verbiage of the old poets, as the faded expression of an angelic ideal, but, on the contrary, as a filthy and glaring sacrilege.

There is good reason to insist upon the exception represented, in this respect, by the flower on the plant. In fact, if one continues to apply the method of interpretation introduced here, on the whole the external part of the plant is endowed with an unambiguous meaning. The appearance of leafy stems generally gives the impression of strength and dignity. Without a doubt the insane contortions of tendrils and the unusual lacerations of foliage bear witness to the fact that all is not uniformly correct in the peace in one's heart and to the lifting of one's spirits, as well as to one's loftier notions of justice and rectitude, than the spectacle of fields and forests, along with the tiniest parts of the plant, which sometimes manifest a veritable architectural order, contributing to the general impression of correctness. No crack, it seems—one could stupidly say no *quack*—conspicuously troubles the decisive harmony of vegetal nature. Flowers themselves, lost in this immense movement from earth to sky, are reduced to an episodic role, to a diversion, moreover, that is apparently misunderstood: they can only contribute, by breaking the monotony, to the inevitable seductiveness produced by the general thrust from low to high. And in order to destroy this favorable impression, nothing less is necessary than the impossible and fantastic vision of roots swarming under the surface of the soil, nauseating and naked like vermin.

Roots, in fact, represent the perfect counterpart to the visible parts of a plant. While the visible parts are nobly elevated, the ignoble and sticky roots wallow in the ground, loving rottenness just as leaves love light. There is reason to note, moreover, that the incontestable moral value of the term *base* conforms to this systematic interpretation of the meaning of roots: what is *evil* is necessarily represented, among movements, by a movement from high to low. That fact is impossible to explain if one does not assign moral meaning to natural phenomena, from which this value is taken, precisely because of the striking character of the *appearance*, the sign of the decisive movements of nature.

Besides, it would seem impossible to eliminate an opposition as flagrant as the one that differentiates stem from root. One legend in particular demonstrates the morbid interest, which has always been more or less pronounced, in the parts that shove themselves into the earth. The obscenity of the mandrake root is undoubtedly fortuitous, like the majority of specific symbolic interpretations,

but it is no coincidence that this type of emphasis, to which the mandrake root owes a legendary satanism, is based on an obviously ignoble form. The symbolic values of the carrot and the turnip are also fairly well known.

It was more difficult to show that the same opposition appeared in an isolated part of the plant, the flower, where it takes on an exceptionally dramatic meaning.

There can be no doubt: the substitution of natural forms for the abstractions currently used by philosophers will seem not only strange but absurd. It is probably fairly unimportant that philosophers themselves have often had to have recourse, though with repugnance, to terms that derive their value from the production of these forms in nature, as when they speak of *baseness*. No blindness interferes with defending the prerogatives of abstraction. This substitution, moreover, threatens to carry one too far: it would result, in the first place, in a feeling of freedom, the free availability of oneself in every sense, which is absolutely unbearable for the most part, and the troubling contempt for all that is still—thanks to miserable evasions—*elevated*, noble, sacred . . . Don't all these beautiful things run the risk of being reduced to a strange *mise en scène*, destined to make sacrilege more impure? And the disconcerting gesture of the Marquis de Sade, locked up with madmen, who had the most beautiful roses brought to him only to pluck off their petals and toss them into a ditch filled with liquid manure—in these circumstances, doesn't it have an overwhelming impact?

Materialism

Most materialists, even though they may have wanted to do away with all spiritual entities, ended up positing an order of things whose hierarchical relations mark it as specifically idealist. They situated dead matter at the summit of a conventional hierarchy of diverse facts, without perceiving that in this way they gave in to an obsession with the *ideal* form of matter, with a form that was closer than any other to what matter *should be*. Dead matter, the pure idea, and God in fact answer a question in the same way (in other words perfectly, and as flatly as the docile student in a classroom)—a question that can only be posed by philosophers, the question of the essence of things, precisely of the *idea* by which things become intelligible. Classical materialists did not really even substitute causation for the *must be* (the *quare* for the *quamobrem*, or, in other words, determinism for destiny, the past for the future). Their need for external authority in fact placed the *must be* of all appearance in the functional role they unconsciously assigned the idea of science. If the principle of things they defined is precisely the stable element that permitted science to constitute an apparently unshakeable position, a veritable divine eternity, this choice cannot be attributed to chance. The conformity of dead matter to the idea of science is, among most materialists, substituted for the religious relations earlier established between the divinity and his creatures, the one being the *idea* of the others.

Materialism will be seen as a senile idealism to the extent that it is not immediately based on psychological or social facts, instead of on artificially isolated physical phenomena. Thus it is from Freud, among others—rather than from long-dead physicists, whose ideas today have no meaning—that a representation

of matter must be taken. It is of little importance that the fear of psychological complications (a fear that only bears witness to intellectual weakness) causes timid souls to see in this attitude an aversion or a return to spiritual values. When the word *materialism* is used, it is time to designate the direct interpretation, *excluding all idealism*, of raw phenomena, and not a system founded on the fragmentary elements of an ideological analysis, elaborated under the sign of religious relations.

Eye

Cannibal delicacy. It is known that civilized man is characterized by an often inexplicable acuity of horror. The fear of insects is no doubt one of the most singular and most developed of these horrors as is, one is surprised to note, the fear of the eye. It seems impossible, in fact, to judge the eye using any word other than *seductive*, since nothing is more attractive in the bodies of animals and men. But extreme seductiveness is probably at the boundary of horror.

In this respect, the eye could be related to the cutting edge, whose appearance provokes both bitter and contradictory reactions; this is what the makers of the *Andalusian Dog*¹ must have hideously and obscurely experienced when, among the first images of the film, they determined the bloody loves of these two beings. That a razor would cut open the dazzling eye of a young and charming woman—this is precisely what a young man would have admired to the point of madness, a young man watched by a small cat, a young man who by chance holding in his hand a coffee spoon, suddenly wanted to take an eye in that spoon.

Obviously a singular desire on the part of a white, from whom the eyes of the cows, sheep, and pigs that he eats have always been hidden. For the eye—as Stevenson exquisitely puts it, a *cannibal delicacy*—is, on our part, the object of such anxiety that we will never bite into it. The eye is even ranked high in horror, since it is, among other things, the *eye of conscience*. Victor Hugo's poem is sufficiently well known; the obsessive and lugubrious eye, the living eye, the eye that was hideously dreamed by Grandville in a nightmare he had shortly before his death;² the criminal "dreams that he has just struck down a man in a dark wood . . . Human blood has been spilled and, to use an expression that



(Derniers dessins de J.-J. GRANDVILLE.—Premier rêve.—Crime et expiation.)

Figure 2. Last illustrations of J. J. Grandville: "First Dream: Crime and Expiation" (1847). Phot. Bibl. nat. Paris.

presents a ferocious image to the mind, *he made an oak sweat*.³ In fact, it is not a man, but a tree trunk . . . bloody . . . that thrashes and struggles . . . under the murderous weapon. The hands of the victim are raised, pleading, but in vain. Blood continues to flow." At that point an enormous eye appears in the black sky, pursuing the criminal through space and to the bottom of the sea, where it devours him after taking the form of a fish. Innumerable eyes nevertheless multiply under the waves.

On this subject, Grandville writes: "Are these the eyes of the crowd attracted by the imminent spectacle of torture?" But why would these absurd eyes be attracted, like a cloud of flies, by something so repugnant? Why as well, on the masthead of a perfectly sadistic illustrated weekly, published in Paris from 1907 to 1924, does an eye regularly appear against a red background, above a bloody spectacle? Why isn't the *Eye of the Police*—similar to the eye of human justice in the nightmare of Grandville—finally only the expression of a blind thirst for blood? Similar also to the eye of Crampon, condemned to death and approached by the chaplain an instant before the blade's fall: he dismissed the chaplain, but enucleated himself and gave him the happy gift of his torn-out eye, *for this eye was made of glass*.

Notes

1. This extraordinary film is the work of two young Catalans: the painter Salvador Dali, one of whose characteristic paintings we reproduce below (p. 25), and the director Luis Bunuel. See the excellent photographs published by the *Cahiers d'art* (July 1929, p. 230), by *Bifur* (August 1929, p. 105) and by *Variétés* (July 1929, p. 209). This film can be distinguished from banal avant-garde productions, with which one might be tempted to confuse it, in that the screenplay predominates. Several very explicit facts appear in successive order, without logical connection it is true, but penetrating so far into horror that the spectators are caught up as directly as they are in adventure films. Caught up and even precisely caught by the throat, and without artifice; do these spectators know, in fact, where they—the authors of this film, or people like them—will stop? If Bunuel himself, after the filming of the slit-open eye, remained sick for a week (he, moreover, had to film the scene of the asses' cadavers in a pestilential atmosphere), how then can one not see to what extent horror becomes fascinating, and how it alone is brutal enough to break everything that stifles?

2. Victor Hugo, a reader of *Le Magazin pittoresque*, borrowed from the admirable written dream *Crime and Expiation*, and from the unprecedented drawing of Grandville, both published in 1847 (pp. 211–14), the story of the pursuit of a criminal by an obstinate eye; it is scarcely useful to observe, however, that only an obscure and sinister obsession, and not a cold memory, can explain this resemblance. We owe to Pierre d'Espezel's erudition and kindness our awareness of this curious document, probably the most beautiful of Grandville's extravagant compositions.

[The poem by Victor Hugo to which Bataille refers is "La Conscience" (in the collection *La Légende des siècles* [Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1950], pp. 26–27). The poem in fact presents the eye of God following Cain, even into a (self-imposed) tomb. Tr.]

3. ["Faire suer un chêne" (literally, "to make an oak sweat") is a slang expression that could be translated as "to exploit a guy" or "to rip off a guy." Tr.]

The Big Toe

The big toe is the most *human* part of the human body, in the sense that no other element of this body is as differentiated from the corresponding element of the anthropoid ape (chimpanzee, gorilla, orangutan, or gibbon). This is due to the fact that the ape is tree dwelling, whereas man moves on the earth without clinging to branches, having himself become a tree, in other words raising himself straight up in the air like a tree, and all the more beautiful for the correctness of his erection. In addition, the function of the human foot consists in giving a firm foundation to the erection of which man is so proud (the big toe, ceasing to grasp branches, is applied to the ground on the same plane as the other toes).

But whatever the role played in the erection by his foot, man, who has a light head, in other words a head raised to the heavens and heavenly things, sees it as spit, on the pretext that he has this foot in the mud.

Although within the body blood flows in equal quantities from high to low and from low to high, there is a bias in favor of that which elevates itself, and human life is erroneously seen as an elevation. The division of the universe into subterranean hell and perfectly pure heaven is an indelible conception, mud and darkness being the *principles* of evil as light and celestial space are the *principles* of good: with their feet in mud but their heads more or less in light, men obstinately imagine a tide that will permanently elevate them, never to return, into pure space. Human life entails, in fact, the rage of seeing oneself as a back and

forth movement from refuse to the ideal, and from the ideal to refuse—a rage that is easily directed against an organ as *base* as the foot.

The human foot is commonly subjected to grotesque tortures that deform it and make it rickety. In an imbecilic way it is doomed to corns, calluses, and bunions, and if one takes into account turns of phrase that are only now disappearing, to the most nauseating filthiness: the peasant expression “her hands are as dirty as feet,” while no longer true of the entire human collectivity, was so in the seventeenth century.

Man’s secret horror of his foot is one of the explanations for the tendency to conceal its length and form as much as possible. Heels of greater or lesser height, depending on the sex, distract from the foot’s low and flat character.

Besides, this uneasiness is often confused with a sexual uneasiness; this is especially striking among the Chinese, who, after having atrophied the feet of women, situate them at the most excessive point of deviance. The husband himself must not see the nude feet of his wife, and it is incorrect and immoral in general to look at the feet of women. Catholic confessors, adapting themselves to this aberration, ask their Chinese penitents “if they have not looked at women’s feet.”

The same aberration is found among the Turks (Volga Turks, Turks of Central Asia), who consider it immoral to show their nude feet and who even go to bed in stockings.

Nothing similar can be cited from classical antiquity (apart from the use of very high soles in tragedies). The most prudish Roman matrons constantly allowed their nude toes to be seen. On the other hand, modesty concerning the feet developed excessively in the modern era and only started to disappear in the nineteenth century. M. Salomon Reinach has studied this development in detail in the article entitled “Pieds pudiques” [“Modest Feet”],¹ insisting on the role of Spain, where women’s feet have been the object of the most dreaded anxiety and thus were the cause of crimes. The simple fact of allowing the shod foot to be seen, jutting out from under a skirt, was regarded as indecent. Under no circumstances was it possible to touch the foot of a woman, this liberty being, with one exception, more grave than any other. Of course, the foot of the queen was the object of the most terrifying prohibition. Thus, according to Mme D’Aulnoy, the Count of Villamediana, in love with Queen Elizabeth, had the idea of starting a fire in order to have the pleasure of carrying her in his arms: “Almost the entire house, worth 100,000 écus, was burned, but he was consoled by the fact that, taking advantage of so favorable an occasion, he took the sovereign in his arms and carried her into a small staircase. He took some liberties there, and, *something very much noticed in this country, he even touched her foot*. A little page saw it, reported it to the king, and the latter had his revenge by killing the count with a pistol shot.”

It is possible to see in these obsessions, as M. Reinach does, a progressive refinement of modesty that little by little has been able to reach the calf, the ankle, and the foot. This explanation, in part well founded, is however not sufficient if one wants to account for the hilarity commonly produced by simply imagining the *toes*. The play of fantasies and fears, of human necessities and aberrations, is in fact such that fingers have come to signify useful action and firm character, the toes stupor and base idiocy. The vicissitudes of organs, the profusion of stomachs, larynxes, and brains traversing innumerable animal species and individuals, carries the imagination along in an ebb and flow it does not willingly follow, due to a hatred of the still painfully perceptible frenzy of the bloody palpitations of the body. Man willingly imagines himself to be like the god Neptune, stilling his own waves, with majesty; nevertheless, the bellowing waves of the viscera, in more or less incessant inflation and upheaval, brusquely put an end to his dignity. Blind, but tranquil and strangely despising his obscure baseness, a given person, ready to call to mind the grandeurs of human history, as when his glance ascends a monument testifying to the grandeur of his nation, is stopped in mid-flight by an atrocious pain in his big toe because, though the most noble of animals, he nevertheless has corns on his feet; in other words, he has feet, and these feet independently lead an ignoble life.

Corns on the feet differ from headaches and toothaches by their baseness, and they are only laughable because of an ignominy explicable by the mud in which feet are found. Since by its physical attitude the human race distances itself *as much as it can* from terrestrial mud—whereas a spasmodic laugh carries joy to its summit each time its purest flight lands man's own arrogance spread-eagle in the mud—one can imagine that a toe, always more or less damaged and humiliating, is psychologically analogous to the brutal fall of a man—in other words, to death. The hideously cadaverous and at the same time loud and proud appearance of the big toe corresponds to this derision and gives a very shrill expression to the disorder of the human body, that product of the violent discord of the organs.

The form of the big toe is not, however, specifically monstrous: in this it is different from other parts of the body, the inside of a gaping mouth, for example. Only secondary (but common) deformations have been able to give its ignominy an exceptionally burlesque value. Now it is easy, most often, to account for burlesque values by means of extreme seductiveness. But we are led here to distinguish categorically two radically opposed kinds of seductiveness (whose habitual confusion entails the most absurd misunderstandings of language).

If a seductive element is to be attributed to the big toe, it is evidently not one to satisfy such exalted aspirations as, for example, the perfectly indelible taste

that, in most cases, leads one to prefer elegant and correct forms. On the contrary, if one chooses, for example, the case of the Count of Villamediana, one can affirm that the pleasure he derived from touching the queen's foot specifically derived from the ugliness and infection represented by the baseness of the foot, in practice by the most deformed feet. Thus, supposing that the queen's foot was perfectly pretty, it still derived its sacrilegious charm from deformed and muddy feet. Since a queen is *a priori* a more *ideal* and ethereal being than any other, it was human to the point of laceration to touch what in fact was not very different from the stinking foot of a thug. Here one submits to a seduction radically opposed to that caused by light and ideal beauty; the two orders of seduction are often confused because a person constantly moves from one to the other, and, given this back and forth movement, whether it finds its end in one direction or the other, seduction is all the more acute when the movement is more brutal.

As for the big toe, classic foot fetishism leading to the licking of toes categorically indicates that it is a phenomenon of base seduction, which accounts for the burlesque value that is always more or less attached to the pleasures condemned by pure and superficial men.

The meaning of this article lies in its insistence on a direct and explicit questioning of *seductiveness*, without taking into account poetic concoctions that are, ultimately, nothing but a diversion (most human beings are naturally feeble and can only abandon themselves to their instincts when in a poetic haze). A return to reality does not imply any new acceptances, but means that one is seduced in a base manner, without transpositions and to the point of screaming, opening his eyes wide: opening them wide, then, before a big toe.

Note

1. In *L'Anthropologie*, 1903, pp. 733-36; reprinted in *Cultes, mythes et religions*, 1905, vol 1, pp. 105-10.

The “Lugubrious Game”

Intellectual despair results in neither weakness nor dreams, but in violence. Thus abandoning certain investigations is out of the question. It is only a matter of knowing how to give vent to one’s rage; whether one only wants to wander like madmen around prisons, or whether one wants to overturn them.¹

To halfheartedness, to loopholes and deliria that reveal a great poetic impotence, one can only oppose a black rage and even an incontestable bestiality; it is impossible to get worked up other than as a pig who rummages in manure and mud uprooting everything with his snout—and whose repugnant voracity is unstoppable.

If the forms brought together by a painter on a canvas had no repercussion, and for example, since we are speaking of voracity—even in the intellectual order—if horrible shadows that collide in the head, if jaws with hideous teeth had not come out of Picasso’s skull to terrify those who still have the impudence to think honestly, then painting at the very most would be good for distracting people from their rage, as do bars or American films. But why hesitate to write that when Picasso paints, the dislocation of forms leads to that of thought, in other words that the immediate intellectual movement, which in other cases leads to the idea, aborts. We cannot ignore that flowers are aphrodisiacs, that a single burst of laughter can traverse and stir up a crowd, that an equally obstinate abortion is the shrill and incendiary blast of the *non serviam* that the human brute opposes to the idea. And the idea has over man the same degrading power that a harness has over a horse; I can snort and gasp: I go, no less, right and

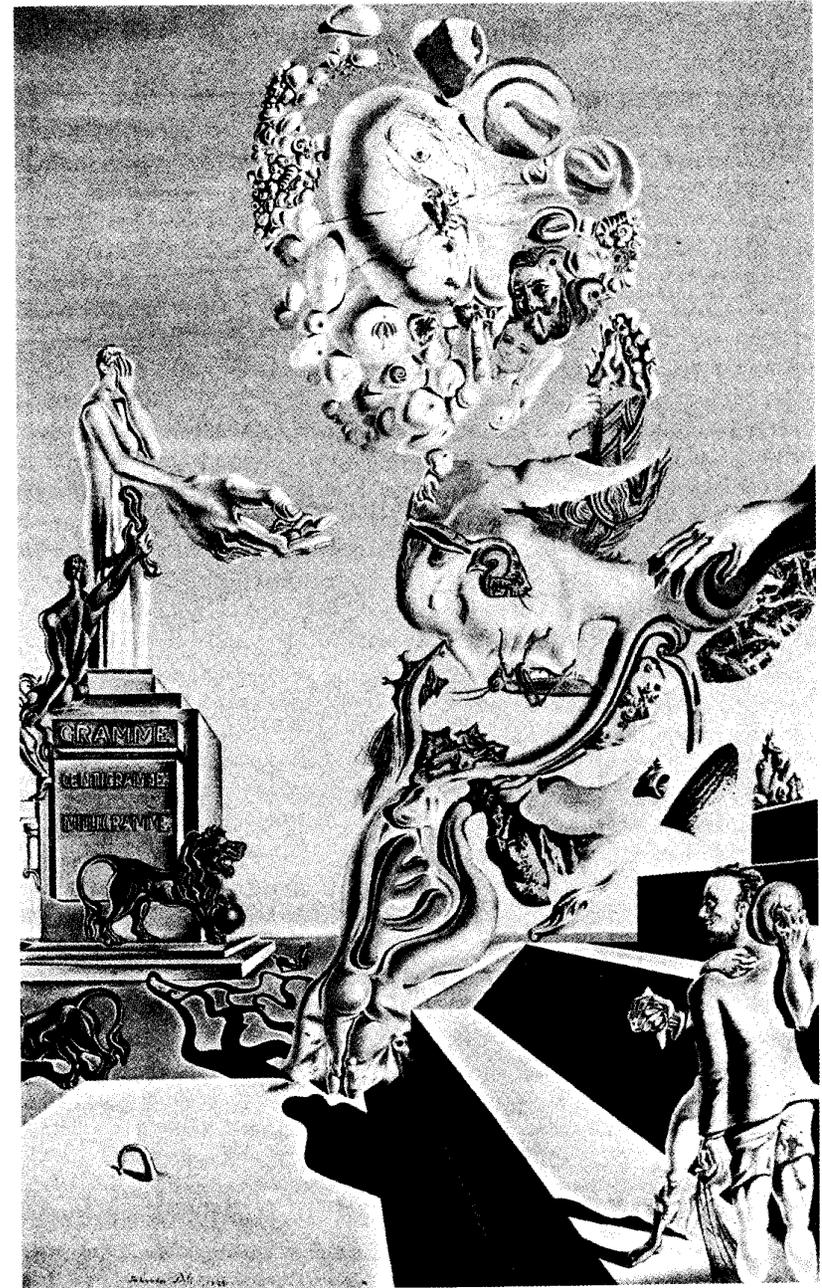


Figure 3. “The Lugubrious Game” by Salvador Dali. © S.P.A.D.E.M., Paris/V.A.G.A., New York, 1983.

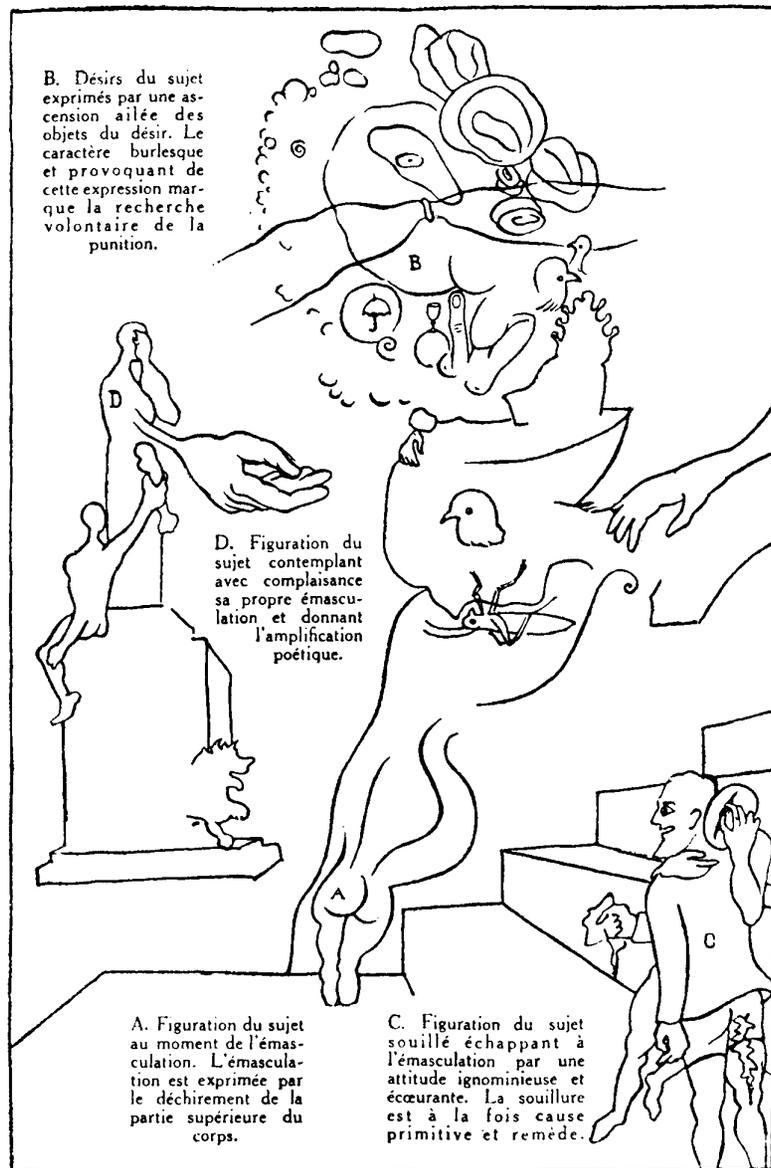


SCHÉMA PSYCHANALYTIQUE DES FIGURATIONS CONTRADICTOIRES DU SUJET DANS "LE JEU LUGUBRE" DE SALVADOR DALI.

left, my head bridled and pulled by the idea that brutalizes all men and causes them to be docile—the idea in the form of, among other things, a piece of paper adorned with the arms of the State. Taking into account trickery, human life always more or less conforms to the image of a soldier obeying commands in his drill. But sudden cataclysms, great popular manifestations of madness, riots, enormous revolutionary slaughters—all these show the extent of the inevitable backlash.

This leads me to state, almost without introduction, that the paintings of Picasso are hideous, that those of Dali are frighteningly ugly.² One is a victim of the awkwardness of words, or even of an evil spell resulting from the practices of black magic, when one attempts to believe otherwise. All it takes is to imagine suddenly the charming little girl whose soul would be Dali's abominable mirror, to measure the extent of the evil. The tongue of this little girl is not a tongue but a she-rat. And if she still appears admirably beautiful, it is, as they say, because black blood is beautiful, flowing on the hide of a cow or on the throat of a woman. (If violent movements manage to rescue a being from profound boredom, it is because they can lead—through some obscure error—to a ghastly satiating ugliness. It must be said, moreover, that ugliness can be hateful without any recourse and, as it were, through misfortune, but nothing is more common than the equivocal ugliness that gives, in a provocative way, the illusion of the opposite. As for irrevocable ugliness, it is exactly as detestable as certain beauties: the beauty that conceals nothing, the beauty that is not the mask of ruined immodesty, the beauty that never contradicts itself and remains eternally at attention like a coward.)

Little by little the contradictory signs of servitude and revolt are revealed in all things. The great constructions of the intellect are, finally, prisons: that is why they are obstinately overturned. Dreams and illusory Cimmerii remain within reach of the zealously irresolute, whose unconscious calculations are not so clumsy since they innocently shelter revolt from laws. Besides, how could one not admire the loss of will, the blind manner, the drifting uncertainty rang-

Figure 4. Psychoanalytic Schema of the Contradictory Representations of the Subject in "Lugubrious Game" of Salvador Dali.

A. Representation of the subject at the moment of emasculation. The emasculation is expressed by the laceration of the upper part of the body.

B. The subject's desires expressed by a winged ascension of the objects of desire. The burlesque and provocative character of this expression indicates the voluntary pursuit of punishment.

C. Representation of the soiled subject escaping emasculation through an ignominious and nauseating posture. The stain is both original cause and remedy.

D. Representation of the subject contemplating with complacency his own emasculation and giving a poetic amplification.

ing from willful distraction to attentiveness? It is true that I am speaking here of what already sinks into oblivion when Dali's razors carve into our faces the grimaces of horror that probably risk making us vomit like drunkards this servile nobility, this idiotic idealism that leaves us under the spell of a few comical prison bosses.

Dogs, vaguely sick from having so long licked the fingers of their masters, howl themselves to death in the countryside, in the middle of the night. These frightening howls are answered—as thunder is answered by the racket of rain—by cries so extreme that one cannot even talk of them without excitement.

A few days before July 14, 1789, the Marquis de Sade, for years doomed to rage in his cell in the Bastille, excited the crowd around the prison by screaming insanely into the pipe that was used to carry off his filthy water—an insane cry that was doubtless the most far-reaching ever to strain a larynx. This scream is reported historically as follows: "People of Paris," shouted Sade, "they are killing the prisoners!" Practically the scream of an old *rentière* with her throat slashed at night in a suburb. It is known that Governor Launay, justifiably frightened by the riot that was starting to explode, had the frenzied prisoner transferred to another prison; this however did not prevent his head, only a few hours later, from terrifying the town on the end of a pike.

But if one wants explicitly to account for the excessive character of this scream, it is necessary to refer to the deposition of Rose Keller, which accuses Sade of inflicting cruelties upon her. This deposition, recently discovered by M. Maurice Heine,³ is categorical. The young woman recounts that, after being tortured with a whip, she tried to move, with her tears and entreaties, a man both so pleasing and so evil; and as she invoked everything in the world that was saintly and touching, Sade, suddenly gone wild and hearing nothing, let out horrifying and perfectly nauseating screams . . .

It is well known that a long-standing uneasiness, going back a number of years, has no other meaning than the feeling that something is missing from existence; it is hardly useful to insist upon the fact that it is for want of the power to let out or hear such screams that, on all sides, restless people have plainly lost their heads, condemning human life to boredom and disgust, while pretending at that very instant to conserve and even to defend it, at the first opportunity, heroically, against stains that seem to them ignoble.

This is said without any critical intention, for it is evident that violence, even when one is beside oneself with it, is most often of sufficient brutal hilarity to exceed questions about people. My only desire here—even if by pushing this bestial hilarity to its furthest point I must nauseate Dali—is to squeal like a pig before his canvases.

For reasons which, out of consideration for him, I put off explaining,⁴ Dali

has refused to allow the reproduction of his paintings in this article, thus doing me an honor that was as unexpected as I may believe it was persistently sought. I am not unaware of the cowardice and the poverty of spirit reflected, by and large, in the attention paid to his recent productions, to minor and major discoveries. Having gotten caught up in the game, I at least have the good fortune to speak of a man who will necessarily take this article as a provocation and not as a traditional bit of flattery, who will hate me, as I am well aware, as a *provocateur*.

Nowhere, no doubt, from one end to the other of the regions inhabited by the bourgeoisie, is there anything going on that is noticeably different from the rest, from the past, from political traditions, from literary traditions; nevertheless, and moreover without attaching any other importance to it, I can say that from now on it is impossible to retreat and hide in the "wonderland" of Poetry without being publicly condemned as a coward.

Notes

1. This is a portion of an unpublished essay on the inferiority complex. The title is borrowed from the painting by Salvador Dali, whose schema is reproduced on p. 26 (this painting belongs to the Viscount de Noailles and appeared in the Dali show at the Galerie Goemans in November 1929). The *Lugubrious Game*, as moreover the text of the schema indicates, is nothing other than the complex in question. This complex was already apparent in relatively early Dali paintings. *Blood is Sweeter than Honey* (published in *Documents 4*) is characteristic; the body with the head, hands, and feet cut off, the head with the face cut, the ass, symbol of grotesque and powerful virility, lying dead and decomposed, the systematic fragmentation of all the elements of the painting . . .

Even more explicit is the episode of the sliced eye in *An Andalusian Dog*, the film of Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali (see *Documents 4*, p. 218, and the text of the screenplay in *Revue du cinema*, November 1929, and *Révolution surréaliste 12*, December 1929).

Bunuel himself told me that this episode was the invention of Dali, to whom it was directly suggested by the real vision of a narrow and long cloud cutting across the lunar surface (I can add here that the dead and decomposing asses that reappear in *An Andalusian Dog* represent an obsession shared by Buñuel and Dali, and go back for each of them to the identical discovery, during childhood, of a decomposing ass-cadaver in the countryside).

Even the title, *Lugubrious Game*, adopted by Dali can be taken as an indication of the explicit value of this painting, in which the genesis of emasculation and the contradictory reactions it carries with it are translated with an extraordinary wealth of detail and power of expression. Without pretending to exhaust the psychological elements of this painting, I can indicate here their general development. The very act of emasculation is expressed by Figure A, whose body, from the waist up, is completely torn off. The provocation that immediately caused this bloody punishment is expressed in B by dreams of virility of a puerile and burlesque temerity (the masculine elements are represented not only by the bird's head but by the colored umbrella, the feminine elements by men's hats). But the profound and early cause of the punishment is nothing other than the ignoble stain of the man in his underwear (C), a stain moreover without provocation, since a new and real virility is rediscovered by this person in ignominy and horror themselves. Yet the statue on the left (D) still personifies the unusual satisfaction found in sudden emasculation and betrays a hardly virile need for the poetic amplification of the game. The hand concealing the virility of the head is a suppression of a rule in the painting of Dali, in which persons who for the most part have lost their heads find them only on the condition that they grimace with horror. This permits one to inquire seriously about

the orientation of those who see here for the first time *the mental windows opening wide*, who place an emasculated poetic complacency where there appears only the screaming necessity of a recourse to ignominy.

2. That is, moreover, the only similarity between two bodies of work, which differ from each other as much as a cloud of flies differs from an elephant.

3. I must thank M. Maurice Heine, to whom nothing about Sade is unknown, who kindly authorized me to mention the facts that he recounted orally to me. These facts are found in the deposition of Rose Keller, which is included among the authentic documents of a trial soon to be published, through M. Heine's efforts, by Stendhal and Co.

4. I must say that it is not at all a question of something people commonly would call "suspect," but *certain* stories of the "artistic and literary milieu" genre could in any case provoke intractable disgust.

Formless

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.

The "Old Mole" and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* [Superman] and *Surrealist*

In history as in nature, decay is the laboratory of life.

Karl Marx

If we were to identify under the heading of *materialism* a crude liberation of human life from the imprisonment and masked pathology of ethics, an appeal to all that is offensive, indestructible, and even despicable, to all that overthrows, perverts, and ridicules spirit, we could at the same time identify *surrealism* as a childhood disease of this base materialism: it is through this latter identification that the current prerequisites for a consistent development may be specified forcefully and in such a manner as to preclude any return to pretentious idealistic aberrations.

Sufficient agreement exists concerning present social conditions, bourgeois moral values, and the intellectual edifice that supports them. For quite some time, all thinking that has not undermined this dilapidated edifice has immediately taken on its demeanor of senile trickery and comical smugness. But it is useless to insist here on the bankruptcy of bourgeois culture, on the necessity of destroying one day even its memory, and beginning now to establish a new basis for mental agitation. To whatever extent the unhappy bourgeois has maintained a human vulgarity, a certain taste for virility, disaffection with his own class quickly turns into stubborn hatred. And we must insist from the outset that a still relatively new form of intellectual activity, not yet castrated and domesticated, is linked by the force of things to the uprising of the lower classes against present-day work.

It remains to be seen how this force acts, how what passes through bourgeois heads alienated from practical considerations and given over most often to shrill frenzy can be associated with the ongoing upheaval of all human structures, with a series of social collapses and catastrophes whose magnitude and character naturally exceed the reach of even radical ambitions.

I

In the first place, it is not surprising that any subversion within the bourgeois intellectual domain begins with forms that correspond very imperfectly to the solution of such difficulties. Instead of relying on presently lower forms whose interplay will in the end destroy bourgeois prisons, subversion seeks immediately to create its own values in order to oppose established values, concerned as it is as much with the stifling effect of the present moral order as with the material conditions of the proletariat. Thus it finds itself, scarcely alive, searching for an authority *above* the one that has provoked the revolt. Abused by a system that threatens to crush or domesticate them, individuals have put themselves, in practical terms, at the mercy of what appears to them, through blinding flashes and disheartening attacks of empty verbiage, to be above all the pitiful contingencies of their human existence, for example *spirit*, *surreal*, *absolute*, etc. At first the "surrealist revolution" was independent of the revolt of the lower classes, indeed was defined as nothing but a confused mental state to which was added violent verbiage asserting the necessity of a dictatorship of *spirit*. Subsequently surrealism has recognized the legitimacy of the organizational endeavors and even the principles of Marxist communism, seeing therein the only means to bring about an indispensable revolution in the real world. But the surrealists continued persistently to express their basic predilection for values *above* the "world of facts" with such banal formulas as "revolt of the Spirit," etc. (*The Revolution First and Always*).

It is of course difficult to avoid a feeling of contempt for revolutionaries to whom the revolution is not, before all else, *the decisive phase of the class struggle*. Nevertheless we are not concerned with ephemeral reactions, but with a verification of a general nature: *any member of the bourgeoisie who has become conscious that his most vigorous and vital instincts, if he does not repress them, necessarily make him an enemy of his own class, is condemned, when he loses heart, to forge at once values situated ABOVE all those values, bourgeois or otherwise, conditioned by the order of real things.*

The inevitable character of this exhausting subterfuge is easy moreover to display in broad terms. It is sufficient to recall in the first place that there had not been, before Marx, any revolutionary movement free of idealism (in the most vulgar sense of the word). At even a relatively recent date, the works of Hugo manifested with great literary brilliance this infantile ethical tendency of

revolutionary unrest. While enjoying to the full his class privileges, the bourgeois readily develops a transferred inferiority complex. His "guilt feelings" (resulting from a psychological impulse inherent to consciousness that risks calling into question his personal right to trample down the unfortunate) are skillfully shifted to the bourgeoisie in its entirety. Thus displaced, the guilty conscience expresses itself with a disgusting idealistic verbal outpouring that gives free rein to a craving for cheap utopian blindness. With few exceptions, this is the pitiful psychology of bourgeois revolutionaries before the Marxist organization of the class struggle. It leads to a representation of revolution as a redemptive light rising *above* the world, *above* classes, the overflowing of spiritual elevation and Lamartian bliss.

II

The necessities of political action eliminated these archaic deviations a long time ago. But if one considers, *apart* from large economic upheavals, the psychological perturbations that accompany them (or, more exactly, are a *consequence* of them), one must note the tenacity of developments consistent with the archaic schema of prematerialist revolutions.

But before turning to the description of moral deviations, we will find it useful to refer to the general and essential contradiction of the high and the low, under, for example, its political forms, namely, in the opposition between the eagle and the "old mole."

From the point of view of appearance and brilliance, the eagle is obviously the more virile conception of the two. Not only does it rise in radiant zones of the solar sky, but it resides there with uncontested glamour. The eagle's hooked beak, which cuts all that enters into competition with it and cannot be cut, suggests its sovereign virility. Thus the eagle has formed an alliance with the sun, which castrates all that enters into conflict with it (Icarus, Prometheus, the Mithraic bull). Politically the eagle is identified with imperialism, that is, with the unconstrained development of individual authoritarian power, triumphant over all obstacles. And metaphysically the eagle is identified with the *idea*, when, young and aggressive, it has not yet reached a state of pure abstraction, when it is still only the unbounded development of concrete fact disguised as divine necessity.

Revolutionary idealism tends to make of the revolution an eagle above eagles, a *supereagle* striking down authoritarian imperialism, an idea as radiant as an adolescent eloquently seizing power for the benefit of utopian enlightenment. This detour naturally leads to the failure of the revolution and, with the help of military fascism, the satisfaction of the elevated need for idealism. The Napoleonic epic represents its least ridiculous development: the castration of an Icarian revolution, shameless imperialism exploiting the revolutionary urge.

Meanwhile, brought back to the subterranean action of economic facts, the "old-mole" revolution hollows out chambers in a decomposed soil repugnant to the delicate nose of the utopians. "Old mole," Marx's resounding expression for the complete satisfaction of the revolutionary outburst of the masses, must be understood in relation to the notion of a geological uprising as expressed in the *Communist Manifesto*. Marx's point of departure has nothing to do with the heavens, preferred station of the imperialist eagle as of Christian or revolutionary utopias. He begins in the bowels of the earth, as in the materialist bowels of proletarians.

We should not be surprised to see such a general human contradiction as that between things low and things elevated represented here in the form of very particular psychological representations. It is true that philosophical usage excludes inverted reductions of this sort. But for this reason, philosophical usages themselves are in question. That is to say that to substitute endlessly and mutually reducible notions for the scandalous image of contingent nature making free determinations would only express the hatred of philosophers for those blind realities that are as insensitive to philosophical categories as rats gnawing books. The philosophers who work with obstinate patience to emasculate the representation of the world evidently would prefer to believe that a certain liberty of bearing, the provocative character of events, is superficial. Even in its most general form, the opposition which runs from the Very-High to the Very-Low has disappeared with the success of secular philosophy. At least it has ceased to occupy any specific position among other problems, for human vocabulary continues everywhere to maintain throughout a faithful memory of fundamental categories.

That this has been the fate of an essential problem, literally placed under a bushel, while evidence of it necessarily leaps forth every time a moral judgment is pronounced, is readily explained if we recognize that it was necessary at any cost to endow antinomies in general with a mechanical and abstract character (as with Kant or Hegel). It is true that it seems easy to characterize in this manner the antinomy of high and low, but this antinomy, more than any other, is thereby immediately deprived of interest and meaning. All of its interest and meaning are linked to the irreconcilable nature of its specific forms: the terrifying darkness of tombs or caves and the luminous splendor of heaven, the impurity of earth where bodies rot and the purity of lofty space; on the order of the individual the base and noble faculties, on the political order the imperialist eagle and the "old-mole" revolution, as on the universal order matter, vile and base reality, and elevated spirit. This language, unknown by philosophers (at least explicitly), is nonetheless a universal language for the human race.

It is true that this language was provisionally rejected because of the forms to which it gave rise. But it has been taken up again in our own times for its material character. Whenever one has recourse to image

often peremptory and provocative ones, borrowed from the most concrete of contradictions, it is reality on the material order, human physiology, that comes into play. A man is not so different from a plant, experiencing like a plant an urge that raises him perpendicular to the ground. It will not be difficult to show that human morality is linked to the urge to an erect posture that distinguishes the human being from the anthropomorphic ape. But on the other hand, a plant thrusts its obscene-looking roots into the earth in order to assimilate the putrescence of organic matter, and a man experiences, in contradiction to strict morality, urges that draw him to what is low, placing him in open antagonism to all forms of spiritual elevation. Such urges have always been eloquently rebuked, confused in their aggregate with the most immediately nefarious of specific passions: base and greedy for decomposition, they are no less the deep roots that give such a staggering sense to words as little acknowledged and allowing as little puerile hope to subsist as *human heart*.

If one now considers social strata, universally divided into upper and lower, it is impossible to deny that aspirations are produced within each class that head in one direction as well as in the other. Nevertheless the upper classes make almost exclusive use of ideas—i.e., the most elevated forms of human life—for even when those ideas have a low origin they are no less elaborated in a *high place*, in high intellectual spheres, before taking on universal value. On the other hand, the movements of the human heart, introducing with historical upheavals their immense disorder and their greedy vulgarity, are produced only within the proletariat, in the submerged masses dedicated to measureless agitation (even patriotic movements, directed and exploited by the dominant bourgeoisie, have consistency only insofar as they are supported by the deep eddies provoked in the lower social strata; meanwhile they are produced like the debauchery of minors for the benefit of bourgeois elegance and spiritual elevation, just as these authorize and organize capitalist exploitation).

III

Returning now to the particular case of the moral abnormalities that result when disheartened individuals betray their class, let us note first of all that hatred of bourgeois spiritual elevation, of fair words and empty promises, appeared for the first time with extraordinary acuteness and freshness in the writings of Nietzsche. An entire philosophy, neglected only for pragmatic reasons, has as its aim the establishing of values that would permit individuals to raise themselves above human class conditions. At the heart of Nietzsche's demands lies such flagrant disgust for the senile idealism of the establishment, such passionate revolt—so spiteful toward the hypocrisy and the moral shabbiness that presides over current world exploitation—that it is impossible to define his work as one

of the ideological forms of the dominant class. Not that Nietzsche had anything whatsoever in common with the working proletariat: he was far from perceiving that there is only one solution to the difficulties that gave play to the violence of his language, namely the renunciation of all moral values associated with class superiority, the renunciation of all that deprives "distinguished" men of the virility of the proletarian. Nietzsche was condemned by circumstances to imagine his break with conformist ideology as an Icarian adventure. The urge that obliged him brutally to reject bourgeois tawdriness and conventional morality did not come from below, from the submerged upheaval of the human masses (by definition, bourgeois individuals can feel nothing directly of all that is overwhelming in those masses—an imperviousness to fact is undeniable); the only hope for emancipation for an individual of the bourgeois class derives from eventual action of an Icarian complex. It is impossible to betray one's class through friendship for the proletariat, but only through an inclination to seize what one must call, in accordance with Nietzsche's terminology, "fire from heaven," and this is to be accomplished by simple subversion, for the pleasure of infringing supposedly intangible laws. But individuals only want to seize fire from heaven in order to annihilate themselves, like mites in the presence of an acetylene torch.

In effect, what can there be in the will to rise above social conditions, if one excludes the unconscious pathological desire to be struck down violently like Icarus and Prometheus. Current economic conditions force the ruling classes to rely upon undeniably less ethereal values than in the past. It is impossible to renew today the substitutions wrought during the Middle Ages; whereas the idealized Chivalry of the Holy Grail or an absurd knight errantry could buttress an exploitative and cynically self-serving "chivalric" class, present-day capitalism has been unable to invent any sublimation for the condition of a banker or captain of industry. The perfectly clear reason is that the category of the sublime, maintained in the development of a strictly military imperialism (with, for example, the eagle as moral emblem) has become useless to industrial and commercial development in ordinary times. Above all it has become irreconcilable with the practice of capitalist exploitation, which requires level-headedness, not foolish generosity, aptitude for mathematical speculation, nor the spirit of adventure. In capitalism power itself is carried to the highest abstraction of an idea (bank capital), and in order to exist, to attain selfhood, it suffices for the individual to participate regularly in this power (the least sensuous that has ever existed); however mundane its objective may be, this power constitutes a perfect incarnation of this idea, i.e., what is most elevated and free of the intervention of any values other than material utility. Under those conditions, what does the urge to resort to the elevated and sublime, to protests against the impoverishment of human nature, signify? A regression certainly.

It would be boorish today to neglect the frequency of the first reactionary

movements, romanticisms, boorish to deny the reactionary and romantic character of Nietzschean morality. Doubtless it would be difficult to find in Nietzsche's work a shadow of the sentimental foolishness and the medieval awkwardness of the sentimental romantics (the French romantics or Wagner, for example). But it is Nietzsche's very awareness of the risk resulting from an exaltation literally unexpected—and lacking any object—that placed him in the classical rut of claims for a morality of the masters. It is not the masters who need such a morality: exploiters are not going to seek their values in unbalanced philosophy. When their values are given to them immediately by the economic conditions of exploitation, American bankers dispense with *The Will to Power*. Only the Nietzschean romantic exaltation required an improbably soaring of archaic values (rigorously exposed, it is true, by a philologist) borrowed from the dominant classes of primarily military epochs (Greek antiquity, the Italian Renaissance). And those values, if one provisionally sets aside the elimination of Christian elements and the introduction of moral cynicism, are reduced to the hivalric values on which modern society rested until the progressive introduction of bourgeois capitalist values.

But for a sick individual, isolated from his class and any social activity, what would the result finally be of these value substitutions? It is evident that a man like Nietzsche, wanting to assert the human splendor of people who really had exercised domination—a splendor determined by social forms that had disappeared—could only become aware, in the first place, of his ineptitude for current social forms, and, in the last, of the excessively derisive and even imbecilic character of this mental activity—brilliant or not.

Archaisms can be useful to conservatives. In the mind of a rebel, they represent no more than an Icarian illumination. Nietzsche was never attracted except by thoroughly defunct values that had become impractical and scandalous: values intended to ridicule prosaically—in their own eyes as well as in others—the adherents of a doctrine that is only a shattering provocation. Obviously if the man of genius admired by the mob is at bottom, as he admits, only a ludicrous and wretched creature, one has only to see things as they are: he only carries a splendid and intellectual nightmare to the sublime the better to offer as liver to the beak of simpletons and louts who lay down the law in contemporary society. And so he becomes the torn and at the same time insulting victim of unprecedented stupidity.

We must insist on the fact that there is no other *immediate* outcome for interior agitation resulting from an individual's inability to limit himself to the bourgeois ideal. Nietzsche revealed this primordial fact: once God had been killed by the bourgeoisie, the immediate result would be catastrophic confusion, emptiness, and even a sinister impoverishment. Therefore it was necessary not only to create new values, but more precisely values able to fill the void left by God: hence a series of antireligious and ethereal values.

Not that Nietzsche was altogether incapable of wallowing in the mud. Since the beginning of reactions against bourgeois mental forms, the tendency to see outmoded values as base has of necessity made way for itself, but only in the background. Zarathustra's "sense of the Earth" is a precise indication in that respect. Nor should one forget that Nietzsche already spoke of the sexual basis of higher psychic functions. He even went so far as to give greatest value from the perspective of philosophical truth to outbursts of laughter (may any truth that has not made you burst out laughing at least once be seen by you as false). It is nonetheless true that the opposing tendency quickly gained the upper hand, that laughter, brutal expression of the heart's baseness, became along with truth something elevated, weightless, Hellenic, etc.

IV

The same double tendency is found in contemporary surrealism, which maintains, of course, the predominance of higher ethereal values (clearly expressed by the addition of the prefix *sur*, the trap into which Nietzsche had already fallen with *superman*). More precisely, since surrealism is immediately distinguishable by the addition of low values (the unconscious, sexuality, filthy language, etc.), it invests these values with an elevated character by associating them with the most immaterial values.

The resulting adulterations matter little to the surrealists: that the unconscious is no more than a pitiable treasure-trove; that Sade, emasculated by his cowardly apologists, takes on the form of a moralising idealist . . . All claims from below have been scurrilously disguised as claims from above: and the surrealists, having become the laughing-stock of those who have seen close up a sorry and shabby failure, obstinately hold on to their magnificent Icarian pose.

In December 1929, M. Breton did not hesitate to make himself ridiculous by writing that "the simplest surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd." He adds: "Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd, with his belly at barrel level."¹ That such an image should present itself so insistently to his view proves decisively the importance in his pathology of castration reflexes: such an extreme provocation seeks to draw immediate and brutal punishment. But the worst is not to be subject to reactions of this order (which no bourgeois rebel, it goes without saying, could have avoided); the *literary* use to which they are put is much more significant. Others instinctively know how blocked impulses are to be taken into account. The surrealists employ them in literature, in order to attain the displaced and pathetic grandeur that ridicules and strips them of relevance. For when bourgeois society refuses to take them seriously and to take up the challenge they

offer, satisfied to isolate them in an impotent harangue that transforms them little by little into carnival puppets, the surrealists have found the destiny they were seeking, such that they would accept no other at any price. For them it was never a question of really terrifying: the intrinsic character of the bogeymen they play is sufficient, for they are eager to play the role of juvenile victims, despicable victims of a general incomprehension and degradation.

The transformations of Icarian reflexes into a pathetic-comic and gratuitous literature is doubtless surrealism's most striking characteristic. (With the apparent resolution to defend an increasingly mocking position, they have pushed an ill-considered provocation so far as to raise a hue and cry against those who would want speech to lead to action.) But interior moral activity, in all its forms, differs in no wise from this conspicuous literary exploitation. It is all too evident that the surrealists do not seek to achieve a contemptuous attitude through consciousness of their own moral integrity. On the contrary, a few radical principles serve only to enable them to feel their own life by contrast as a shabby joke, or they know too well their own lethargy and inertia, all too many haggling deals and petty compromises . . . But the Icarian movement consists precisely of acting and even thinking as if they had attained without laughter the violent spiritual elevation that is only the empty rumbling of their words. They heap uncompromising accusations upon dissident surrealists and experience at the same time the highest degree of bitter pleasure, because they feel obscurely, whatever their verbal arrogance, that their own fall is no less profound, nor even less apparent: how can they hide from themselves at bottom that certain of their accusations provoke only outbursts of laughter (or else imbecilic pity)?

Nevertheless one must pity those persons on whom a reading of the *Second Surrealist Manifesto* makes no strong impression—I say this without the least irony. Coming abruptly, after several prefaces of which the least one can say that they betray a profound poverty of spirit, the *Second Manifesto* is without any doubt the most consequential work, the most consistent declaration, that the surrealists have attempted for a long time. Even its most radical implications have not yet been revealed, and perhaps it is useful that they are *here*, in the "remarkable garbage pail known," if one believes M. Breton, as *Bifur* . . . ²

One could not repeat too much how childish it is to deny the *inevitable* spiritual upheavals and unrest that the surrealists have thought themselves able to express. This is why it is important to point out sharply the detour which the *Second Manifesto* resolutely executes with a dedication that rises to astonishing solemnity.

One can be grateful to M. Breton for several indications which recall the profound impulses that set things in motion at the beginnings of the surrealist movement. And we are not especially concerned here with what touches upon religion, family, or country: these, as it turns out, do not depend on the wrath of

the surrealists to appear to us sticky with spittle. But without showing any respect for literary antiques, we can recognize that the "unhealthy" character of several works by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Huysmans, and Lautréamont still remains the most that can be accomplished in this domain. Everything leads us to believe that surrealism still shares their obsession with unhealthiness, which is to say just how impossible it is at the present moment for anything human to arise, except in the cesspool of the heart; nonetheless it is regrettable that these unhealthy forms are limited to the poetic, and that, for M. Breton, to pass from brilliant shadow play to the *failed acts* that today underlie human existence, is to "hold any rung whatever of this *degraded* ladder . . ."³

It is regrettable, we say, that nothing can enter into M. Breton's confused head except in poetic form. All of existence, conceived as *purely* literary by M. Breton, diverts him from the shabby, sinister, or inspired events occurring all around him, from what constitutes the real decomposition of an immense world. Given the wrongs of the *times*, the confused and inert stupefaction of a collective bourgeois existence dedicated to nothing less than the mustiness of the balance sheet, the surrealists find no meaning in an ignoble rout save a pretext for tragic, headlong flight. Since "all that does not aim at the annihilation of being in an interior and blind radiance"⁴ is *vulgar* in his eyes, M. Breton seeks only, in sluggish confusion, raising on occasion some sad shreds of grandiloquence, to provoke a panic capable of justifying his willful aberrations. Unfortunately, even M. Breton has not managed so far to be frightened by his own phraseology . . .

Servile idealism rests precisely in this will to poetic agitation rather than in a strictly juvenile dialectic: a completely unhappy desire to turn to upper spiritual regions, a hatred of vulgarity, the base vulgarity that decomposes everything in a flash—leaving the pearls of wisdom to the mercy of the first swine. A peevish aristocracy, mental askesis—with such necessities, both puritanical and conventional, hypocrisy without the excuse of practical value begins. Where in it is the untrammelled frenzy of the heart, of a heart greedy for each contradiction crudely granted to solemn destiny, to each thing's *duty to be*—greedy, one must say with aggressive shame, to see its most touching and angelic flights of fancy sullied? . . . All this unhealthiness, vulgar or not, outside of which there is no life, but only the elements that provoke it (just as in the same street there is no love, but only beings brought together in their common greed by so little), this unhealthiness is perhaps no more than a literary last resort. For "everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. One would search in vain for any motivation behind surrealist activity other than this point . . ."⁵ Nothing less is called for than the *annihilation* of healthy contingencies as well as the unhealthy contingencies of nature. But this enterprise,

however surprising it may appear coming from a man who does not usually aspire to childishness (who would even appear, if one were to judge from several citations, not to be unaware of Hegel's *Logic*), this enterprise does not aim so much as one might think at the *empty abstraction* envisaged by Hegel, but rather, more exactly, at what M. Breton, with professional ease, himself calls "an interior and blind radiance . . . no more the soul of ice than of fire." Heaven's vault, still the Icarian illumination and the same flight toward the heavens from which it seems it will be easy to curse this base world (but from which we know above all with what derisive ease a man is cast)—it is into the *brilliant immensity of the sky*, not into the void of Hegelian being-nothingness that M. Breton is constantly thrown by verbal momentum. M. Breton deludes himself, he abuses his mob like a priest when he undertakes to resolve contradictions so slippery for him as elevated and base. What need he has to make us believe that his preferred states are situated outside of everything, when every sentence he writes situates them *above*, when he is reduced to speak of nothing but "brief beauty concealed and of the long and accessible beauty that can be revealed."⁶ From one who speaks across the heavens, full of aggressive respect for heaven and its lightning bolts, full of disgust for this too base world that he believes he scorns—scorns more than anyone has ever scorned it before him—after touching Icarian naiveté has betrayed his desire for the miraculous, we can only expect the sad but impotent will to provoke panic and the betrayal of the vulgar interests of the collectivity, which have become simply filth, a pretext to rise with cries of disgust.

Do not be shocked by the significance I place on the interpretation of an image (fundamental moreover in the *Second Manifesto*) as an equivalent of the Icarian celestial vault. An analysis of M. Breton's behavior permits us, moreover, to specify the sense of this psychological entity, to note in a general way the role of the sun in human impulses. Even though the blinding celestial vault, when it becomes a psychological obsession, implies spiritual elevation, this spiritual elevation fails to take on the value of steadfastness or conservation. In this case spiritual elevation is almost entirely determined by the conscious or unconscious desire for one of the basest forms of agitation, but this desire cannot be satisfied except by an elevation increasingly stripped of sense and purely aggressive, consequently tied to the most derisive, the most inane contempt for vulgar human nature. Placed in these conditions, a man comes to regard habitual vulgarity as a sign of guilt and punishment, for he is obliged to render himself guilty of extraordinary excesses in the most turbulent kind of exaltation, in order to regain this vulgarity, which has become for him a vertiginous consciousness of his fall. But when such a man begins to speak, he can arrange sentences in his mind only to condemn the entire earth, the base earth, domain of pure abjection. He even associates the image of the impending fall with this terrifying

course on the earth: "Let him," we read at the end of the *Second Manifesto*, "in spite of any restrictions, use the avenging arm of the *idea* against the bestiality of all beings and all things, and let him one day, vanquished—but *vanquished only if the world is world*—welcome the discharge of his sad rifles like a salvo fired in salute."⁷

In the conditions that have just been specified, it is evident at the very least that the implications of surrealism can be pursued only as negation (the provisional use of the Hegelian term is of little significance here). Only the rupture that eliminates the slightest concern for recognition, the slightest respect for persons (not even true contempt, hardly crass derision), allows this moral infantilism to pass to free subversion, the basest subversion. The passage from Hegelian philosophy to materialism (as from utopian or Icarian socialism to scientific socialism) makes explicit the necessary character of such a rupture. The forms of mental activity (in its most interior manifestations) do not have a development perceptibly different from the development of intellectual determinations concerning economic and social existence.

The earth is base, *the world is world*, human agitation is only vulgar and perhaps not acknowledgeable: this is the shame of Icarian despair. But to the *loss of the head* there is no other reply: a crass sneer, vile grimaces. For it is human agitation, with *all* the vulgarity of needs small and great, with its flagrant disgust for the police who repress it, it is the agitation of *all* men (except for this police and the friends of the police), that alone determines revolutionary mental forms, in opposition to bourgeois mental forms. In human terms no baseness values, at present, the rage of refined literati, lovers of an accursed poetry; what cannot move the heart of a ditchdigger already has the existence of shadows. There remains, it is true, the almost artificial lighting, which serves to display the ruins. And down with denigrators of an immediate "human interest," down with all the scribblers with their spiritual elevation and their sanctified disgust for material needs!

For those bourgeois who still exercise a certain mastery of their old intellectual domain, there is no possibility of instituting a culture, or even, more generally, purely proletarian principles of *mental* action. But there is no possibility for any class until bourgeois principles have become altogether and for everyone principles of derision and general disgust—including Icarian subterfuge, even if this subterfuge will be regarded someday as a kind of dawn of mental liberation, just as bourgeois revolutions represent the dawn of proletarian revolution. By excavating the fetid ditch of bourgeois culture, perhaps we will see open up in the depths of the earth immense and even sinister caves where force and human liberty will establish themselves, sheltered from the call to order of a heaven that today demands the most imbecilic elevation of any man's spirit.

Notes

1. [*The Second Surrealist Manifesto*, in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, translated by R. Seaver and H. R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 125. Tr.]
2. [Ibid, p. 166. Tr.]
3. [Ibid, p. 125. Tr.]
4. [Ibid, p. 124. Translation modified. Tr.]
5. [Ibid, p. 123. Translation modified. Tr.]
6. [Ibid, p. 187. Tr.]
7. [Ibid, p. 187. Tr.]

Base Materialism and Gnosticism

If one thinks of a particular object, it is easy to distinguish matter from form, and an analogous distinction can be made with regard to organic beings, with form taking on the value of the unity of being and of its individual existence. But if things as a whole are taken into account, transposed distinctions of this kind become arbitrary and even unintelligible. Two verbal entities are thus formed, explicable only through their constructive value in the social order: an abstract God (or simply the idea), and abstract matter; the chief guard and the prison walls. The variants of this metaphysical scaffolding are of no more interest than are the different styles of architecture. People become excited trying to know if the prison came from the guard or if the guard came from the prison; even though this agitation has had a primordial historical importance, today it risks provoking a delayed astonishment, if only because of the disproportion between the consequences of the debate and its radical insignificance.

It is nevertheless very remarkable that the only kind of materialism that up to now in its development has escaped systematic abstraction, namely dialectical materialism, had as its starting point, at least as much as ontological materialism, absolute idealism in its Hegelian form. (There is no need to go back on this method: materialism, whatever its scope in the positive order, necessarily is above all the obstinate negation of idealism, which amounts to saying, finally, of the very basis of *all* philosophy.) Now Hegelianism, no less than the classical philosophy of Hegel's period, apparently proceeded from very ancient metaphysical conceptions, conceptions developed by, among others, the Gnostics, in